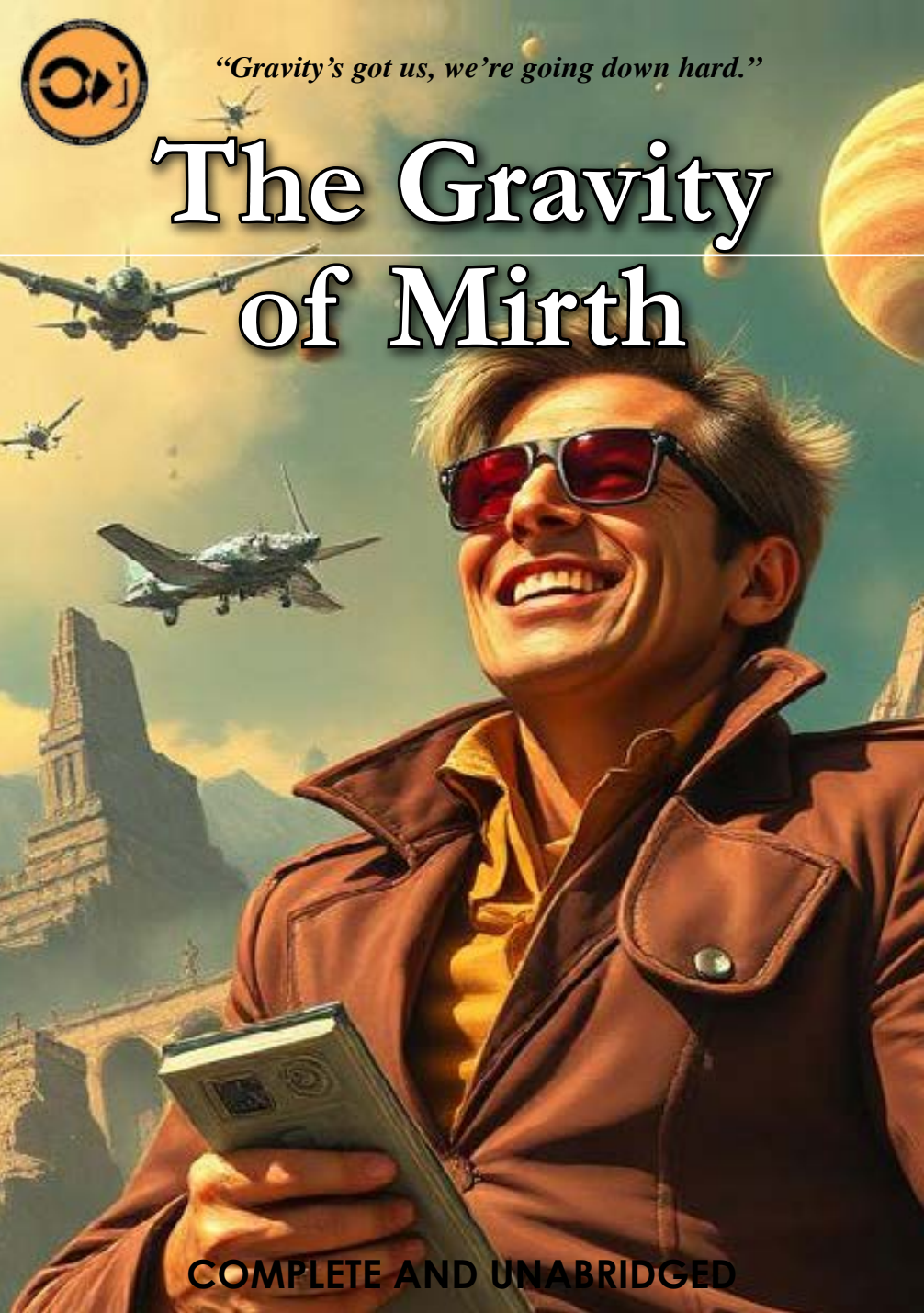
"Gravity's got us, we're going down hard."

The Gravity of Mirth



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Ovi Pulp

The gravity of Mirth

Complete and unabridged

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Ambassador Varn Krall had once negotiated a ceasefire between two hive-minds who communicated exclusively through interpretive dance and the scent of burning magnesium. He had convinced a cybernetic squid to disarm its planet-killer by complimenting its tentacle-to-circuit ratio. He had even and this remained classified under seven different treaties made a sentient black hole 'apologize' for swallowing a trade delegation.

But as his crippled diplomatic cruiser spiralled toward the jade-green surface of Xirix-Prime, Krall realized that none of his previous triumphs had prepared him for this.

"Gravity's got us," growled Pilot Jessa Vonn, her cybernetic fingers dancing across a console that spat sparks like an angry cat. "We're going down hard."

Krall tightened his harness. The ship's hull sang a death-rattle. Through the viewport, he saw a civilization of spiralling towers carved from living coral, each structure pulsing with a soft, organic glow. Beautiful. Alien. And, according to the pre-landing brief he'd skimmed during the approach, absolutely 'deadly' if you so much as chuckled.

"Remember," he said to the bridge crew, "no smiling. No laughter. If you feel a funny thought coming on, bite your tongue."

"That's insane," said Science Officer Mira Thorne, clutching a datapad. "The Xirixi consider laughter an act of war. They evolved from predatory fungi that used sonic vibrations to liquefy prey. Humour triggers their ancient hunting instincts."

"Then let's be boring," Krall replied.

The ship hit the coral canopy. Trees older than human civilization snapped like twigs. Metal screamed. Krall's head struck his console, and the last thing he saw before the world went black was the image of his own reflection in the cracked viewport, a grim, scarred face with tired eyes and a mouth that hadn't smiled in years.

He'd need that mouth now.

Because when he awoke, bound in silk-fibber chains before a throne of woven bone, the Hive-Empress Vex'kalis was staring at him with six jewelled eyes.

And Krall had just, in his unconscious fall, farted.

It wasn't loud. But on Xirix-Prime, where silence was law, a soft, wet 'pfft' carried the weight of a declaration of war.

The court gasped. The empress's mandibles twitched.

And Ambassador Varn Krall, the galaxy's finest diplomat, did the only thing a man with nothing left to lose could do.

He giggled.

Not a full laugh. A nervous, terrified, adrenaline-fueled giggle that escaped his throat like a trapped mouse.

The empress's eyes went dark.

"Twenty-four hours," she whispered, her voice a chorus of a thousand throats. "Make me laugh sincerely, or your crew feeds the joy-parasites."

Krall looked at the stolen joke book hidden in his

boot. At the illegal adrenaline vial tucked beneath his tongue. At the faces of his terrified crew.

He smiled.

It was not a pleasant smile.

"Empress," he said, "have you heard the one about the human who walked into a bar and ordered a singularity?"

The room went very, very quiet.

The diplomat's gambit

Ambassador Varn Krall had not survived fifty-seven first-contact missions by being a fool. He had, however, survived them by being a very specific kind of fool, the kind who knew exactly when to play dumb and exactly when to play dead. This situation, he decided as the Hive-Empress's six eyes bore into him like drills, required both.

The throne room of Xirix-Prime was a cathedral of nightmares. Bioluminescent moss dripped from vaulted ceilings, casting everything in a sickly amber glow. The walls were woven from the exoskeletons of the empress's ancestors, each one etched with the story of a war begun by a misplaced smile. At the center of

it all sat Vex'kalis herself, a towering mantis-like creature draped in silken robes that writhed as if alive. Her mandibles clicked in a rhythm that made Krall's teeth ache.

"You find flatulence amusing," she said. Not a question. An accusation.

Krall's mind raced. The adrenaline vial burned under his tongue, a tiny glass cylinder of pure, illegal courage. He'd stolen it from a black-market doctor on Ceres Station three years ago, saving it for an emergency exactly like this one. He cracked it with his teeth. The chemical hit his bloodstream like lightning.

"Empress," he said, his voice steady despite the tremors in his hands, "I find everything amusing. It's a character flaw. My mother cried at my birth because she said I came out grinning."

The court rustled. A dozen Xirixi nobles shifted on their segmented legs, their antennae twitching with barely contained outrage. One of them, a smaller, more vibrantly coloured creature with too many eyes, hissed audibly.

Vex'kalis raised a claw. Silence fell.

"You have twenty-two hours now," she said. "You

wasted two of them with your… intestinal declaration."

Behind Krall, his crew knelt in silk-fibber bonds. Pilot Jessa Vonn, her cybernetic arm sparking uselessly. Science Officer Mira Thorne, her datapad crushed, her glasses askew. And young Ensign T'bor, the amphibian navigator whose skin was already drying out in the alien atmosphere. Three lives. Three people who trusted him to talk his way out of anything.

"I need context," Krall said, pushing himself to his feet. The guards didn't stop him. Perhaps they were curious. Perhaps they wanted to see him fail. "Laughter is genocide. Humour is war. I understand the biology. But what about *sincerity*? You want me to make you laugh sincerely. That implies you have a concept of insincere laughter."

The empress's mandibles parted slightly. Was that surprise? Interest? Krall couldn't tell.

"We are not mindless beasts," Vex'kalis said. "We understand deception. A forced laugh is a lie. A sincere laugh is a confession of shared absurdity. To laugh sincerely with another is to admit that the universe is ridiculous. And for a hive-empress," she leaned forward, her shadow swallowing Krall whole, "that is the greatest treason of all."

Krall nodded slowly. “So you want me to commit treason. With a joke.”

“I want you to try.”

She snapped her claws. Guards seized Krall’s crew and dragged them toward a gaping hole in the floor. From below came a wet, squelching sound—the joy-parasites, Krall assumed. Creatures that fed on mirth, that burrowed into the brain and forced their host to laugh until their lungs collapsed.

“Wait!” Krall shouted.

The guards paused.

Krall reached into his boot. The stolen joke book was small, leather-bound, and utterly ridiculous. He’d acquired it from a dying comedian on a space station that no longer existed. The comedian had claimed the book contained the funniest jokes in the galaxy. Krall had thought it was a lie. Now, it was his only weapon.

He opened to a random page.

“Empress,” he said, clearing his throat. “Why did the quantum chicken cross the road?”

The court leaned in. Even the guards hesitated.

Krall read the punchline: "Because it was both on the other side and not on the other side until you looked."

Silence.

A Xirixi noble in the back made a sound like a deflating balloon. Krall couldn't tell if it was a laugh or a death rattle.

The empress's eyes narrowed.

"That," she said, "is not funny."

"No," Krall agreed. "It's not. But it's a start."

He flipped the page. His heart pounded. The adrenaline made his vision sharpen until he could see every hair on the empress's thorax.

"How about this one? A human, a Xirixi, and a sentient star walk into a bar. The bartender says, 'What is this, some kind of joke?'"

The empress's mandibles twitched again. Krall held his breath.

Then she spoke, and her voice was ice.

"You have twenty-one hours. And you just wasted thirty seconds."

She gestured. The guards resumed dragging the crew toward the pit.

Krall's mind screamed. He needed something better. Something faster. Something that would make this alien empress see the universe the way he did, as a chaotic, absurd, hilarious disaster.

He closed the joke book.

And he began to tell the truth.

The joke that wasn't

"Stop," Krall said. Not loud. Quiet. The kind of quiet that cuts through noise like a scalpel.

The guards hesitated. The empress tilted her head, a disturbingly human gesture from a creature with six eyes and a mouth full of grinding plates.

"Explain," she commanded.

Krall took a breath. The adrenaline made his heart a hammer, but his voice remained steady. He'd learned long ago that fear was a tool. You just had to grip it by the blade.

"Empress, I'm going to tell you a joke. But it's not in the book. It's not something you'll find in any comedy

routine or stand-up holovid. It's a true story. And it's the funniest thing I've ever witnessed."

The court stirred. A Xirixi noble whispered to its neighbour. The empress silenced them with a glance.

"Speak."

Krall began.

"Ten years ago, I was assigned to mediate a dispute between two species, the Glorn and the Thren. The Glorn were silicon-based lifeforms who communicated through rhythmic vibrations. The Thren were gas-bag creatures who floated through their methane atmosphere singing operas. They'd been at war for seventy years over a single asteroid. Not because it contained resources. Not because it had strategic value. But because the Glorn thought the asteroid looked like a fist, and the Thren thought it looked like an open hand."

He paused. Let the absurdity sink in.

"I spent six months on that rock. Six months of vibrating and singing and trying to explain the concept of a 'gesture' to beings who had no arms. And then, on the last day of negotiations, the Glorn ambassador, a being the size of a small house, accidentally vibrated

at the exact frequency that made the Thren ambassador's gas sacs rupture."

Someone in the court gasped.

"The Thren deflated," Krall continued, fighting a smile. "He collapsed into a pile of organic tarp. And the Glorn, horrified, tried to apologize by vibrating an apology so intensely that it shattered the asteroid into three pieces."

He let the silence hang.

"Empress, that's not the funny part. The funny part is what happened next. The Thren, deflated but alive, looked up at the Glorn and 'sang'. He sang a song about two fools who couldn't see that they were fighting over nothing. And the Glorn, for the first time in their history, vibrated a frequency that meant ...laughter."

Krall met the empress's gaze.

"They signed a peace treaty that day. And when I asked the Thren why he sang instead of declaring war, he said, and I quote, 'because the universe is too stupid to take seriously.'"

The throne room was silent. So silent that Krall

could hear the distant squelch of the joy-parasites in the pit.

Then, from the back of the court, a single Xirixi made a sound.

It was small. High-pitched. Almost like a hiccup.

The empress's head snapped toward the sound. The offending noble shrank back, its antennae drooping.

"Did you just…?" the empress began.

"No, Your Majesty," the noble squeaked. "I coughed. A political cough."

Vex'kalis turned back to Krall. Her six eyes were unreadable.

"That story," she said slowly, "is not a joke. It is an anecdote. And it did not make me laugh."

Krall's stomach dropped. But he kept his face neutral.

"No," he agreed. "It didn't. But it made someone in your court cough. And a cough, Empress, is just a laugh that's afraid to come out."

The empress's mandibles clicked once. Twice. Then

she leaned back on her throne of bone.

"You have twenty hours. And you have intrigued me, which is more dangerous than you know. Continue."

She snapped her claws. The guards released Krall's crew—for now. They were shoved into a corner, still bound, but no longer dangling over the pit.

Krall exhaled. The adrenaline was fading, leaving a hollow ache in his chest. But he wasn't done. Not by a long shot.

He opened the joke book again. This time, he didn't read a joke.

He read the dedication.

"To those who laugh when they should scream."

The empress's eyes flickered.

"Who wrote this?" she asked.

Krall smiled. It was a grim, tired smile.

"A dead man," he said. "But his jokes are still alive."

The comedian's last breath

The dead man's name was Felix "Fizzy" Farkas, and he had been the funniest human Krall ever met. He was also, by the time their paths crossed, completely insane.

Krall told the empress this as he settled cross-legged on the cold bone floor, the joke book open in his lap. The court had grown still. Even the guards had stopped their restless shifting. Something about Krall's voice, the raw, unpolished honesty of it, had transfixed them.

"Fizzy was a comedian on the orbital station 'Elysium's Joke'," Krall said. "A place where laughter was currency. The harder you made someone laugh, the richer you became. For ten years, Fizzy was the king of

that station. His jokes were weapons. His timing was surgical. He could make a stone cry with a well-placed pun."

"And then?" the empress prompted.

"And then he told a joke so funny that a man in the front row laughed himself to death. Literally. Aneurysm. The man's family sued. The station revoked Fizzy's license. He became an outcast, a pariah, a man whose gift had become a curse."

Krall turned a page in the book. The paper was soft, worn thin by countless readings.

"I met him on a backwater moon where he'd gone to drink himself to death. He was broke. Toothless. He hadn't told a joke in three years. And yet, when I sat down next to him at that filthy bar, he looked at me and said, 'You look like a man who's about to do something stupid. Want a joke book?'"

The empress's antennae twitched. "He gave you the book?"

"He sold it to me. For the price of a bottle of synth-whiskey and my promise to tell one of his jokes to an alien who needed to laugh."

"And did you?"

Krall hesitated. "Not until now."

He closed the book and held it up. "Empress, Fizzy wrote these jokes for beings like you. Beings who have forgotten how to find the universe ridiculous. He believed that laughter was the only honest response to existence. Not because life is funny, but because it's 'absurd'. We're sentient meat bags floating on a rock through infinite nothing, and we spend our lives arguing about borders and trade agreements and who farted in the throne room."

A noble hissed. Krall ignored it.

"Fizzy's final joke," he continued, "is the one he never got to tell. He wrote it on the last page of this book, and he made me swear to save it for the right moment."

Krall turned to the final page. It was blank.

The empress leaned forward. "There's nothing there."

"Exactly," Krall said. "Because the joke is that there is no joke. The funniest thing in the universe, Fizzy

realized, is that we spend our whole lives searching for meaning in a story that has no punchline."

He looked up at Vex'kalis, his eyes tired but clear.

"You want me to make you laugh sincerely, Empress. But sincerity doesn't come from jokes. It comes from recognizing that you and I are both punchlines in a cosmic joke that neither of us wrote."

The throne room was silent for a long moment.

Then the empress's mandibles parted, and she made a sound that Krall had not expected.

She sighed.

"You are either the bravest fool I have ever met," she said, "or the most dangerous. I have not decided which."

"Neither have I," Krall admitted.

"You have nineteen hours. And you have not made me laugh."

"No," Krall said. "But I've made you think. And thinking, Empress, is the first step toward laughing."

The empress's eyes glittered. She gestured to a guard.

"Bring him food and water. He will need his strength."

Then she looked at Krall's crew, still bound in the corner.

"And untie the others. If he fails, they die with him. But let them watch."

Krall's heart lifted slightly. It wasn't freedom. But it was progress.

He took a bite of the alien fruit the guard offered. It tasted like regret and electricity.

"Empress," he said, chewing, "have you ever heard the one about the diplomat who walked into a hive?"

She said nothing. But her antennae twitched.

Krall smiled.

The game was just beginning.

The noble's treason

The food was a trap.

Krall realized this not because it poisoned him, it didn't, but because it was 'delicious'. A succulent purple fruit that burst on his tongue like a sunrise. A bowl of steaming broth that tasted of stars and forgotten memories. The Xirixi, he realized, were master chefs. And that was dangerous, because nothing disarmed a man like good food.

As he ate, a Xirixi noble approached. This was the same one who had "coughed" during Krall's anecdote, the small, vibrantly coloured creature with too many eyes. Up close, Krall saw that its robes were embroidered with symbols of rebellion: broken mandibles, shattered thrones, a sun eating its own children.

"I am Vizier Kex," the creature said, its voice a low buzz. "And I believe we can help each other."

Krall set down his spoon. "Help each other how?"

Kex glanced toward the throne, where the empress was consulting with her guards. "Vex'kalis has ruled for three hundred cycles. She has outlawed laughter, banned humour, and turned our species into a race of grim, joyless automatons. But there are those of us who remember the old ways. Who remember that laughter was once a 'celebration', not a weapon."

"You want me to make her laugh so she'll change the law?"

Kex's mandibles clicked in what Krall recognized as a negative. "No. We want you to make her laugh so she will be *executed*."

Krall choked on his broth. "What?"

"The ancient law is clear," Kex whispered. "Any Xirixi who laughs sincerely in the presence of the hive-empress commits treason. And the punishment for treason is death. If you make Vex'kalis laugh, truly laugh, she will be deposed. And I will take her place."

Krall stared at the vizier. "You're using me to stage a coup."

"I am using you to restore joy to my people," Kex said. "The empress has become a tyrant. She fears laughter because she fears losing control. But control is not the same as order. And order without joy is just a slower form of death."

Krall's mind raced. He had walked into a political assassination plot. Worse, he had become its trigger.

"If I refuse?" he asked.

"Then your crew dies in eighteen hours," Kex said. "And you die with them. But if you succeed, you will be hailed as a liberator. Your name will be carved into the walls of this very throne room."

Krall looked at his crew. Mira was trying to clean her broken glasses. Jessa was flexing her sparking cybernetic arm. T'bor was breathing shallowly, his amphibian skin cracking.

"I need to think," Krall said.

Kex nodded. "You have until the nineteenth hour. Then I will need your answer."

The vizier slithered away, disappearing into the crowd of nobles.

Krall closed his eyes. He had come to Xirix-Prime to negotiate a simple trade agreement. Now he was caught between a tyrant empress and a revolutionary vizier, with a stolen joke book and a belly full of illegal adrenaline as his only weapons.

He opened the joke book to a random page.

"What do you call a Xirixi with a sense of humour?"

He turned the page.

"Dead."

Krall laughed. It was a hollow, bitter sound.

The guards glared at him.

He didn't care anymore.

The first real laugh

It happened by accident.

Krall was not trying to be funny. He was trying to explain the concept of a "dad joke" to a bemused guard who had asked why humans bothered to reproduce when children were clearly so inefficient.

"You see," Krall said, gesturing with a piece of fruit, "a dad joke is a special kind of humour. It's not meant to be funny. It's meant to be *painful*. The father tells the joke, the children groan, and in that groan, there is love."

The guard tilted its head. "That makes no sense."

"Exactly," Krall said. "That's the point."

He took a bite of fruit. “For example: Why don’t scientists trust atoms?”

The guard waited.

“Because they make up everything.”

Silence.

Then, from behind Krall, a sound.

It was soft. Hesitant. Almost like a wheeze.

Krall turned. Ensign T’bor, the amphibian navigator, was shaking. His gills fluttered. His webbed hands covered his mouth.

But his eyes were wet with suppressed mirth.

“That,” T’bor gasped, “is the stupidest thing I have ever heard.”

And then he laughed.

It was a wet, croaking sound, half giggle, half ribbit. It echoed off the bone walls like a stone skipping across a frozen lake.

The guards stiffened. Their claws went to their weapons.

But Krall held up a hand. "Wait. Watch."

T'bor's laugh faded. He looked horrified at himself. But then, slowly, his lips twitched again.

"Atoms," he whispered. "Making up everything."

He laughed again. Louder this time.

And something remarkable happened.

A Xirixi noble in the corner, a young one, barely more than a larva, let out a tiny chirp. It was not a cough. It was not a political sound.

It was a laugh.

The empress rose from her throne. Her six eyes blazed.

"Who laughed?" she demanded.

The young noble froze. Its antennae drooped.

But Krall stepped forward. "I did, Empress. It was me."

"You lie."

"Of course I lie. I'm a diplomat. It's what we do." Krall spread his hands. "But here's the truth: your peo-

ple want to laugh. They've wanted to laugh for centuries. And the fact that you've forbidden it hasn't killed the desire, it's only made it stronger."

The empress's mandibles ground together. "You are testing my patience."

"No," Krall said. "I'm testing your courage. Are you brave enough to laugh, Empress? Are you brave enough to admit that the universe is ridiculous and that you are just as absurd as the rest of us?"

Vex'kalis descended from her throne. She moved with a grace that belied her size, her claws clicking against the bone floor like a death sentence.

"You have seventeen hours," she said. "And you have just ensured that your crew will watch you die first."

She turned to the guards. "Take the amphibian. Feed him to the parasites. Slowly."

T'bor's eyes went wide.

Krall's heart stopped.

"No," he said. "Empress, wait..."

But the guards were already moving.

And Krall realized, with terrible clarity, that his jokes had just cost a life.

The joy-parasites

The pit was a living thing.

Krall watched from the edge as the guards dragged T'bor toward it. The ensign struggled, his webbed feet scrabbling against the bone floor, but the silk-fibber bonds held him fast. His gills flared in panic.

"Please," T'bor gasped. "I have a spawnling. Her name is Sh'mi. She's only three cycles old."

The guards did not pause.

Krall lunged. A claw caught him in the chest, hurling him backward. He hit the floor hard, the air driven from his lungs.

From the pit came a sound. Wet. Hungry. The joy-parasites were waking.

"Empress," Krall shouted, "if you do this, you prove my point. You prove that you are afraid. Afraid of a joke. Afraid of a laugh. Afraid of a feeling."

Vex'kalis did not look at him. Her eyes were fixed on T'bor.

"I am not afraid," she said. "I am protecting my people."

"From what? Joy? Connection? The realization that you're all just bugs crawling on a rock?"

The court gasped. No one spoke to the empress that way.

But Krall was beyond caring.

"You want sincerity, Empress? Here it is. I am terrified. My hands are shaking. My heart is pounding. I have a stolen joke book and a belly full of illegal drugs, and I am the only thing standing between my crew and death. That's not funny. That's tragic. But you know what's hilarious?"

He pointed at the pit.

"The fact that you think feeding a father to parasites will make you safe. It won't. Because laughter isn't a weapon. It's a *release*. And the more you try to contain it, the more it will explode."

The empress's mandibles stopped moving.

For a long moment, no one spoke.

Then Vizier Kex stepped forward. "Your Majesty, perhaps the human is right. Perhaps a demonstration of mercy would..."

"Silence," Vex'kalis snapped. "I will hear no more from you, traitor."

Kex froze. The empress's eyes had not left Krall, but her words were aimed at the vizier.

"You think I do not know about your little conspiracy?" Vex'kalis said. "You think I do not see the symbols on your robes? You have been plotting against me for fifty cycles, Kex. And now you have allied yourself with a flatulent human and his book of dead jokes."

Kex's antennae drooped. "Your Majesty, I can explain..."

"You can explain nothing." The empress snapped

her claws. Guards seized Kex. "Take him to the pit. He will feed the parasites alongside the amphibian."

Krall's blood ran cold.

Two prisoners. Two lives.

And only one of him.

He did the only thing he could.

He began to tell the worst joke in the book.

The worst joke ever told

Krall stood at the edge of the pit, the joke book open in his trembling hands. The guards had paused, curious despite themselves. Even the empress had turned her head.

"What," Krall announced, "is brown and sticky?"

Silence.

"A stick."

Nothing.

"That's it," Krall said. "That's the joke. It's terrible.

It's the worst joke ever written. And I told it because I want you to understand something."

He closed the book.

"Humour isn't about cleverness. It's about 'surprise'. The unexpected. The moment when your brain expects one thing and gets another. That's why a stick being brown and sticky is funny—because you were expecting something else. Candy. Mud. Something disgusting."

He looked at the empress.

"You expect me to tell you a joke that will make you laugh. You're waiting for it. Anticipating it. And because you're waiting, you won't laugh. Because laughter can't be forced. It has to ...happen."

He stepped closer to the pit. The joy-parasites squelched below, invisible but audible.

"So here's my proposal, Empress. Let T'bor go. Let Kex go. And let me tell you jokes for the next sixteen hours. Not to make you laugh. Just to make you *listen*. And if, at the end of those sixteen hours, you haven't laughed, you can throw me into the pit yourself. No bargaining. No pleading. Just me and the parasites."

The empress's eyes narrowed. "And why would I agree to this?"

"Because you're curious," Krall said. "Because no one has ever spoken to you this way. Because somewhere, deep in that chitinous chest of yours, there's a part of you that wants to know what it feels like to laugh. Not as a weapon. Not as a declaration of war. But as a release."

Vex'kalis was silent for a long time.

Then she gestured. The guards released T'bor and Kex.

"Sixteen hours," she said. "And if you fail, you die alone. Your crew will be returned to their ship and allowed to leave. They will carry the story of your failure across the galaxy."

Krall nodded. "Agreed."

He looked at his crew. Mira's eyes were wet. Jessa's cybernetic fist was clenched. T'bor was trembling.

"I'm sorry," Krall said to them.

Then he turned to the empress.

"Let's begin."

The anatomy of a joke

Krall spent the next hour explaining the structure of humour.

He paced the throne room like a professor addressing a hostile lecture hall, the joke book clutched under his arm. The Xirixi nobles watched with a mixture of horror and fascination. The empress sat motionless on her throne, her six eyes tracking his every move.

"A joke has three parts," Krall said. "Setup, escalation, punchline. The setup establishes expectations. The escalation builds tension. The punchline subverts those expectations. The brain, expecting one thing, receives another, and the mismatch creates a release of tension. That release is laughter."

He stopped in front of the empress.

"Your species evolved to treat that release as a threat. Your predatory ancestors used sonic vibrations to stun prey. Laughter, to you, is the sound of a kill. But here's the thing, you're not predators anymore. You're a civilization. You have art. You have music. You have cuisine. You have everything except the one thing that makes those things meaningful."

"And what is that?" the empress asked.

"Context," Krall said. "A joke without context is just noise. But a joke told between friends, between people who share an understanding of the world that joke becomes a bridge. It connects. It heals."

He opened the joke book.

"Let me tell you a joke that only makes sense to someone who has lost a child."

The empress's mandibles tightened. But she did not stop him.

"A man's daughter dies. He is devastated. He goes to a wise woman and asks, 'How do I stop the pain?' The wise woman says, 'Find a house that has never known sorrow. Take a grain of rice from that house. Bring it to me, and I will make a potion that will heal you.'"

Krall paused.

"The man searches for years. He visits every house in every village. And everywhere he goes, he finds sorrow. Sickness. Death. Loss. Finally, he returns to the wise woman empty-handed. 'I cannot find such a house,' he says. The wise woman smiles. 'Then you have learned that sorrow is universal. You are not alone.'"

Krall looked at the empress.

"That's not a funny joke. It's a sad one. But it contains the seed of humour, because the punchline is this, the man spent years searching for something that didn't exist, and the answer was inside him all along. That's absurd. And absurdity, Empress, is the mother of laughter."

The empress was very still.

"Did you lose a child?" she asked.

Krall nodded. "A son. Fifteen years ago. A shuttle accident. He was seven."

"And you found humour in this?"

"Not at first," Krall said. "But eventually. Because the alternative was madness. And my son would not have wanted his father to go mad."

The empress's antennae drooped slightly.

"You have fourteen hours," she said. But her voice was softer now.

Krall nodded.

He turned the page.

The empress's secret

The confession came at the eleventh hour.

Krall had been telling jokes for five hours. His throat was raw. His legs ached. The adrenaline had long since worn off, leaving him hollow and shaking. But he did not stop.

He told jokes about animals. About politicians. About a monk, a robot, and a talking dog who walked into a bar. He told knock-knock jokes. He told puns so terrible that the guards physically recoiled.

And through it all, the empress sat in silence.

Then, as the hourglass on her throne marked the halfway point, she spoke.

"I had a daughter."

Krall stopped mid-joke.

The court went still. Even the joy-parasites seemed to pause.

"Her name was Vex'liss," the empress continued. "She was hatched three hundred cycles ago. And she was the first Xirixi in a thousand years to laugh."

Krall lowered the joke book. "What happened?"

"I killed her."

The words fell like stones.

"She laughed at a sunset," Vex'kalis said. "She was young. Barely out of her larval stage. She looked at the sky and saw the colours shifting, the amber, the violet, the deep green of approaching night and she laughed. Not a weapon. Not a threat. Just a sound of pure, innocent joy."

The empress's mandibles trembled.

"And I, in my duty to the hive, ordered her execution. Because the law was clear. Laughter was genocide. And I could not make exceptions. Not even for my own blood."

Krall felt something crack inside his chest. "Empress…"

"Do not pity me," Vex'kalis said. "I do not deserve pity. I deserve the pit. I deserve the parasites. But instead, I sit on this throne, and I enforce a law that has cost me everything."

She leaned forward, her six eyes burning.

"You want to make me laugh, Ambassador? You want to hear me confess that the universe is absurd? I already know it is absurd. I have known it for three hundred cycles. But admitting it would mean admitting that my daughter died for nothing. And that is a punchline I cannot bear."

Krall closed the joke book.

He walked to the foot of the throne.

"Empress," he said, "I'm going to tell you one more joke. And if you don't laugh, I will walk into the pit myself."

The court gasped.

Krall ignored them.

He looked up at Vex'kalis, and he smiled.

"What do you call a hive-empress who killed her own daughter for laughing at a sunset?"

The empress's eyes widened.

"A mother," Krall said.

Silence.

Then, from deep within Vex'kalis's thorax, a sound began to build. It was not a laugh. It was a sob. A terrible, keening wail that echoed off the bone walls.

The court recoiled.

But Krall did not move.

He waited.

And after the sob came the laugh.

The laugh that broke the throne

It began as a tremor. A vibration deep in the empress's chitinous chest that spread outward like ripples in a pond. Her mandibles parted. Her six eyes squeezed shut. And from her throat came a sound that no Xirixi had heard in three hundred cycles.

It was not a beautiful laugh. It was ugly. Raw. Broken. It sounded like a rockslide and a scream and a sigh all at once. It shook the throne room. It rattled the bones on the walls. It sent the nobles scrambling for cover.

And it did not stop.

Vex'kalis laughed until her thorax heaved. She laughed until tears, actual, glistening tears, streamed from her jewelled eyes. She laughed so hard that the throne of woven bone began to crack beneath her.

"Stop," she gasped. "I cannot... stop..."

But she could not stop. The laughter had taken her. It was a parasite of its own, burrowing into her brain, forcing out centuries of grief and guilt and loneliness.

Krall watched, his heart pounding. He had done it. He had made the empress laugh.

But the laugh was not gentle. It was not healing. It was a weapon turned inward, destroying the very thing that had contained it.

"Empress," Krall said, stepping forward, "you need to breathe. Focus on my voice."

Vex'kalis clutched the arms of her throne. The bone splintered. Her claws dug deep grooves into the material.

"I cannot," she wheezed. "It is too much. The joy... it is drowning me."

Krall climbed the steps of the throne. He put his hands on the empress's shoulders, a gesture of such audacity that the court fell silent.

"Listen to me," he said. "You are not dying. You are *living*. For the first time in three hundred cycles, you

are alive. And it hurts. I know it hurts. But pain and joy are the same coin, Empress. You cannot have one without the other."

Vex'kalis looked at him with her six tear-streaked eyes.

"I killed her," she whispered.

"I know," Krall said.

"I killed my daughter."

"I know."

"And I would kill her again. Because I am a coward."

Krall shook his head. "No. You are a mother who made an impossible choice. And that is the most human thing I have ever seen in an alien."

The empress's laugh faded. It became a shudder. Then a sigh.

She let go of the throne.

It collapsed behind her.

Vex'kalis sat on the floor of her ruined throne room, surrounded by the bones of her ancestors, and wept.

And Krall wept with her.

The Vizier's betrayal

The weeping had barely ceased when Vizier Kex made his move.

"Seize her," he commanded, pointing at the empress. "By the ancient law, she has laughed. She has committed treason. She is no longer fit to rule."

Guards hesitated. Their antennae twitched. They looked from Kex to the empress to Krall, uncertain.

"The law is clear," Kex insisted. "A Xirixi who laughs in the presence of the hive-empress forfeits the throne. I am the next in succession. Arrest her."

Krall stepped between the guards and the empress. "Don't be a fool, Kex. She just laughed for the first time in three centuries. She's not a threat. She's a woman who's finally allowed to feel."

"She is a tyrant," Kex spat. "And you are a fool who played into my hands. Did you think I helped you out of kindness? I used you, human. And now I will take what is mine."

The guards moved forward. Krall's crew, still bound, still watching, shouted warnings.

But before the guards could reach the empress, Vex'kalis rose.

She was unsteady. Her robes were torn. Her eyes were red. But there was something in her posture that had not been there before.

Something dangerous.

"Kex," she said, her voice quiet, "you have plotted against me for fifty cycles. You have schemed. You have lied. And now, in my moment of weakness, you strike."

Kex's mandibles clicked nervously. "Your Majesty, I am merely enforcing the law."

"The law," the empress repeated. "The law that I wrote. The law that I used to kill my own daughter." She looked at Krall. "The law that was always a lie."

She turned to face her court.

"I am Vex'kalis, Hive-Empress of Xirix-Prime. For three hundred cycles, I have ruled through fear. Through silence. Through the suppression of joy. And I have been wrong."

The court stirred.

"From this day forward," the empress continued, "laughter is no longer a crime. Humour is no longer genocide. The joy-parasites will be destroyed. And any Xirixi who wishes to laugh, truly laugh, may do so without fear of reprisal."

Kex's eyes went wide. "You cannot. The ancient traditions—"

"The ancient traditions are dead," Vex'kalis said. "Just like my daughter. And I will not let them claim another life."

She looked at Krall.

"Thank you," she said.

Krall nodded. “Don’t thank me yet. You still have a vizier to deal with.”

Vex’kalis turned to Kex. “You have two choices. You can swear loyalty to the new order and serve your people in joy. Or you can join the parasites in the pit.”

Kex’s mandibles trembled. He looked at the guards. At the court. At Krall.

Then he dropped to his knees.

“I swear,” he whispered.

The empress extended a claw. Kex touched it with his own.

It was not a laugh. But it was a beginning.

The destruction of the pit

The joy-parasites did not go quietly.

When the empress ordered the pit opened and the creatures destroyed, they fought back. Tentacles of writhing, laughing flesh erupted from the darkness, their maws ringed with teeth that grinned. They had fed on mirth for millennia. They would not starve without a battle.

Krall found himself at the front line, a broken bone from the throne wielded as a club, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with a Xirixi guard who had giggled at his quantum chicken joke.

"Aim for the mouths," the guard buzzed. "Their only weakness is the throat."

Krall swung the bone club. It connected with a parasite's grinning face. The creature shrieked, a sound like a thousand people laughing at once and collapsed.

Beside him, Jessa Vonn's cybernetic arm sparked back to life. She had torn off her bonds during the chaos and was now using her hand as an arc welder, burning tentacles to ash.

"You owe me a new arm," she shouted.

"I owe you a new ship," Krall shouted back.

Mira Thorne had found her crushed datapad and was using its shattered screen as a mirror, reflecting light into the parasites' eyes. T'bor, his amphibian skin cracking but his spirit intact, was singing a Thren opera at the top of his lungs, the vibrations destabilizing the creatures' inner ears.

And at the center of it all stood Vex'kalis.

The empress did not fight with claws or teeth. She fought with laughter. She laughed at the parasites, a deep, rumbling, sincere laugh that echoed through the pit like a war drum. And the parasites, designed to feed on joy, could not handle the dosage.

They overfed. They swelled. They burst.

Within an hour, the pit was silent.

Krall stood at the edge, breathing hard, his bone club dripping with alien ichor. Beside him, the empress wiped a tear from her eye.

"That," she said, "was almost fun."

Krall grinned. "Give it time. You'll learn to enjoy it."

The treaty of Mirth

The negotiations took three days.

Not because they were difficult, but because Krall insisted on including a clause that made puns a protected form of diplomatic speech. The empress's legal advisors nearly resigned en masse.

"You cannot be serious," the head advisor said, his antennae twitching with distress. "Puns are the lowest form of humour."

"They're also the oldest," Krall replied. "And they require a shared understanding of language, context, and absurdity. If your people can tolerate puns, they can tolerate anything."

The empress, seated on a new throne carved from the bones of the destroyed joy-parasites, laughed. She laughed often now. It was still a rusty, unpractised sound, but it came more easily each time.

"Let him have his puns," she said. "What harm can they do?"

The advisor opened his mouth to argue, then closed it. Three days ago, he would have been executed for disagreeing with the empress. Now, he was allowed to argue. It was a strange new world.

The treaty was signed on the fourth day. Krall's crew stood behind him as he pressed his palm to the bioluminescent document. The empress touched it with her claw.

"The United Species Accord of Mutual Mirth," Krall read aloud. "Article One: Laughter shall never be grounds for war. Article Two: Jokes shall be exchanged freely between Xirixi and human territories. Article Three: Any diplomat caught telling a pun in bad faith shall be forced to listen to an hour of the other species' worst comedy."

The empress's mandibles clicked in amusement. "I believe I will enjoy enforcing Article Three."

Krall smiled. "Empress, I believe you will."

The feast of first laughs

That night, the Xirixi held a festival.

It was the first festival in three hundred cycles. The coral towers glowed with bioluminescent colours. The streets filled with dancing nobles and laughing children. Food—delicious, wonderful food—was shared freely.

Krall sat at the empress's right hand, a bowl of purple fruit in his lap. His crew surrounded him, finally clean, finally fed, finally free.

"I never thought I'd say this," Mira said, "but I think I like these people."

"They're not so bad once you get them laughing," Jessa agreed.

T'bor, whose skin had been treated with a moisturizing salve provided by the empress's own physicians, was attempting to teach a group of young Xirixi a Thren opera. It was going poorly. It was also hilarious.

The empress leaned toward Krall. "You never told me," she said, "what happened to Fizzy. The comedian."

Krall set down his fruit. "He died about a year after I met him. Liver failure. He'd been drinking for decades."

"Was he alone?"

"No," Krall said. "I was there. I held his hand. And his last words were, 'Tell them the one about the diplomat and the hive.'"

The empress was quiet for a moment. "And what is that joke?"

Krall smiled. "I can't tell you. It's too soon."

"Too soon for what?"

"Too soon for you to laugh that hard. You might break your new throne."

The empress stared at him. Then her mandibles parted, and she laughed—a loud, full, glorious laugh that echoed across the festival.

The court laughed with her.

And for the first time in three hundred cycles, Xirix-Prime knew joy.

The departure

The repaired diplomatic cruiser sat on a landing pad of woven coral, its hull gleaming in the amber light of the twin suns. Krall stood at the ramp, his crew already aboard, the joke book tucked safely in his jacket.

The empress had come to see him off. She stood with her court behind her, Vizier Kex among them, genuinely loyal now, or at least too terrified to plot further.

"You could stay," Vex'kalis said. "I could use an ambassador of mirth. Someone to teach my people how to laugh without fear."

Krall shook his head. "I have other disasters to turn

into treaties. Other species to offend with my flatulence."

The empress's mandibles clicked. "You will return?"

"I will try," Krall said. "But you know diplomats. We're always busy."

"Then take this." The empress extended a small, pulsating orb. "A fragment of the joy-parasites' core. It will remind you of us."

Krall took the orb. It was warm. It hummed with a gentle, almost musical frequency.

"And take this," he said, handing her the joke book. "Fizzy would have wanted you to have it."

The empress held the book like it was made of glass. "I will treasure it."

They stood in silence for a moment.

Then Krall saluted, a human gesture he had taught her during the negotiations.

The empress returned it.

He turned and walked up the ramp.

The punchline

The ship lifted off. Xirix-Prime shrank below them, a jade-green jewel against the black velvet of space.

Krall sat in the captain's chair, the joy-parasite orb in his hand. His crew was quiet, each lost in their own thoughts.

"Captain," Jessa said finally, "what was the joke? The one about the diplomat and the hive?"

Krall smiled. "You really want to know?"

"Yes," Mira said. "We've earned it."

T'bor nodded. "Tell us."

Krall leaned back in his chair. The stars stretched out before him, infinite and absurd.

"A diplomat walks into a hive," he began. "The hive is ruled by an empress who has outlawed laughter. The diplomat, being a fool, tells her a joke. The empress does not laugh. So the diplomat tells her another joke. Still no laugh. He tells her a hundred jokes. A thousand. He tells her jokes so terrible that the walls themselves groan."

Krall paused.

"Finally, the diplomat gives up. He says, 'Empress, I have failed. You may feed me to your parasites.' And the empress looks at him and says, 'Feed you? Why would I feed you? You've already given me the greatest gift of all.'"

"What gift?" T'bor asked.

Krall grinned. "The gift of trying. The gift of caring enough to be foolish. The gift of standing in front of a tyrant with nothing but a joke book and a belly full of illegal drugs."

He looked at his crew.

"The punchline," he said, "is that there is no punchline. The joke is that we keep trying anyway."

His crew stared at him.

Then, slowly, Mira began to laugh.

Jessa joined her.

T'bor's croaking giggle followed.

And Krall, Ambassador Varn Krall, laughed with them.

The ship sailed on into the darkness, carrying its cargo of mirth.

The empress's first joke

Back on Xirix-Prime, the empress opened the joke book.

She had waited until the palace was quiet. Until the court had retired and the guards had settled into their nightly routines. She sat alone in her throne room, the book in her claws, and turned to the first page.

"Why did the quantum chicken cross the road?"

She remembered Krall telling that joke. She remembered not laughing.

She turned the page.

"A human, a Xirixi, and a sentient star walk into a bar."

She turned another page.

"What do you call a hive-empress who killed her own daughter for laughing at a sunset?"

She stopped.

The answer was written in small, careful handwriting at the bottom of the page.

"A mother."

Vex'kalis closed the book.

She sat in the darkness of her throne room, surrounded by the bones of her ancestors, and she did not laugh.

But she smiled.

It was a small smile. A fragile smile. The smile of someone who had forgotten how to use the muscles involved.

But it was real.

And it was enough.

The gravity of Mirth

Three months later, a message reached Krall's ship.

It was a video transmission. The empress sat on her throne, the joke book open in her lap. Behind her, the court was laughing, actually laughing, at something Vizier Kex had just said.

"Ambassador," Vex'kalis said, "I have been practicing."

She cleared her throat.

"Why did the human cross the galaxy?"

Krall leaned forward in his chair.

The empress smiled.

"Because he heard the Xirixi were dying to meet him."

The court erupted in groans. Someone threw a piece of fruit at the throne.

But the empress was laughing. And her laughter was sincere.

Krall saved the message. He watched it three more times.

Then he turned to his crew.

"Set a course for Xirix-Prime," he said. "I promised her I'd return."

"What about the trade agreement with the Squid Confederacy?" Mira asked.

"They can wait," Krall said. "I have a joke to tell."

He looked out at the stars.

The universe was absurd. It was cruel. It was beautiful.

And somewhere, on a jade-green planet at the edge of known space, a hive-empress was learning to laugh.

That, Krall decided, was the funniest thing he had ever heard.

He smiled.

And the ship sailed on.

The End

Thus concludes the tale of Ambassador Varn Krall, the Hive-Empress Vex'kalis, and the joke that saved a civilization. Let it be known that in the darkest corners of the galaxy, where tyranny and silence reign, a single laugh can be the most dangerous weapon of all. And let it also be known that puns are and always will be, a war crime in twelve systems.

—From the personal logs of Ambassador Varn Krall, Diplomatic Corps, United Species Accord.

The gravity of Mirth

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"Gravity's got us, we're going down hard."

The Gravity of Mirth

Thanos Kalamidas, a multipublished writer, cartoonist and illustrator; born and grew up in a picturesque neighbourhood on the mountainside of Hymettus in Athens, Greece. Then his life took him to Berlin, Germany and to London, UK for studies. After a brief stay in Yorkshire he moved his life to Paris, France while working in Tokyo, Japan and in Cape Town, South Africa. In the last 25 years he became a permanent Scandinavian resident and recently, in his glorious sixth decade, he moved to a scenic village in the Växjö area.

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED